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21 December 1963

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HIGHLIGHTS OF DISCUSSIONS IN SAIGON 18 - 20 December 1963

1. There is no organized government in South Vietnam at this time. The Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC) is in control, but strong leadership and administrative procedures are lacking. Reports were received that province and district chiefs do not act because of the lack of direction and orders. Nevertheless, the MRC are confident. They feel they are winning the support of the people. They recognize there is a big job ahead but feel it is not insurmountable, and they feel their plan of organization will lead to success. They claim complete understanding among all members, however there is evidence of tension which, if it grows, could lead to serious political difficulties.
2. The Military Revolutionary Committee, MRC, has replaced about 70 percent of the 43 province chiefs and a substantial number of the 253 district chiefs. This replacement program is continuing. Many appointments are reported to be good, some not so good. The MRC feel that practically all must be replaced.
3. The MRC feel they have reached an understanding with the Hoa Hao and on 27 December will reach agreement with the Cao Dai. These arrangements could substantially improve the security of the Cambodian border, relieve GVN troops in Hoa Hao and Cao Dai provinces, provide important information on VC concentrations and activities, and have a significant psychological impact on the population. The success of the detente arrangements will bear significantly on the future of the GVN.
4. It is abundantly clear that statistics received over the past year or more from the GVN officials and reported by the US mission on which we gauged the trend of the war were grossly in error. Conditions in the Delta and in the areas immediately north of Saigon are more serious now than expected and were probably never as good as reported. The Viet Cong control larger percentages of the population, greater amounts of territory, and have destroyed or occupied more strategic hamlets than expected. Admittedly, this area of South Vietnam has been recognized as the most serious. Revelation of factual data evidences a far greater problem for the GVN in arresting the unfavorable trend and recovering the situation than was thought.

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5. Starting in about July, indices on progress of the war turned unfavorable for the GVN. The number of Viet Cong attacks and the losses of strategic hamlets to the Viet Cong increased. VC casualties vs GVN casualties, weapons lost vs weapons captured, etc., all turned in favor of the VC and against the GVN. The trend lines were gradual until 1 November the date of the coup, and then moved very sharply against the GVN because of a great increase in number and intensity of VC attacks in the weeks immediately following the coup.

6. The tempo of VC activities has slowed down. Incidents were fewer during the last week in November and have continued at a lower rate so far in December. Concurrently, the tempo of GVN activities has increased. Hence, the trend lines of all indices have turned in favor of the GVN in recent weeks, although in no instance has the situation which existed in June or July, 1963, been recovered.

7. There is continuing evidence of infiltration of cadres and small arms from North Vietnam through Laos and across the Laotian border. [redacted] men with substantial but not precisely known quantities of arms have entered South Vietnam from North Vietnam through Laos this year. 25X1

8. Large machine weapons, such as recoilless rifles, mortars, and anti-aircraft guns, and men trained in their use, have appeared in the delta in recent months. It is not known whether they came through Laos and Cambodia and across the border, down the rivers, or by sea. Large weapons have not appeared in the northern sectors of South Vietnam.

9. The MRC recognizes the seriousness of the problems in the delta and have taken a number of actions which they feel will produce results. However, there is evidence of serious deficiencies in the Self-Defense Corps, which must be corrected. Also, there is an urgent need for substantially more organized GVN units in the delta and the provinces around Saigon.

10. The strategic hamlet has encountered resistance in the delta because relocation removed families from their fields and locations occupied for generations. Many defections of entire villages were reported as due to the above reason. The villages built along the banks of rivers and canals could not be rearranged into defensible compounds without hardships the villagers considered unacceptable.

CONCLUSION

It is my conclusion that the coup came when there was a downward trend which was more serious than was reported and, therefore, more serious than realized.

The military government may be an improvement over the Diem-Nhu regime, but this is not as yet established and the future of the war remains in doubt.

The Viet Cong are receiving substantial support from North Vietnam and possibly elsewhere, and this support can be increased. Stopping this by sealing the borders, the extensive waterways, and the long coast line is difficult, if not impossible.

The VC appeal to the people of South Vietnam on political grounds has been effective, gained recruits for their armed forces, and neutralized resistance.

The ability of the GVN to reverse this trend remains to be proven. Much depends on the ability of the MRC to deploy their forces and pursue the conflict in a manner which will ensure the security of the people and provide them desired freedom, privileges, and some tangible benefits.

The lack of an outstanding individual to lead and absence of administrative experience within the MRC are ominous indicators.

The political stability of the new government under the MRC is subject to serious doubt. Conflicts of ambition, jealousy, differences of opinion over policy matters are all possible, could develop serious schisms, precipitate further dissensions and coup attempts all of which will affect the war effort against the VC.

Overcoming the VC movement by the GVN is formidable and difficult, but not impossible. The problems can be intensified by continuing increased support from NVN and political failures by the MRC. Hence, in my judgment, there are more reasons to doubt the future of the effort under present programs and moderate extensions to existing programs; (i. e., harassing sabotage against NVN, border crossings, etc.) than there are reasons to be optimistic about the future of our cause in South Vietnam.